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The German Underground

One of the most tragically ill-fated movements in recent history—the German resistance—is explored from the inside in the excellent book by Hans B. Gisevius, a leader and one of the few survivors of that movement. *To the Bitter End* is more, however, than a study of the resistance; it is also an essay in mass psychology—a partial answer to the question which has bothered people outside of Germany for more than a decade: How did the German people come to let the patent evil that was Nazism engulf and enslave them?

Gisevius expressly states that he is writing no "facile apologies" for Germany. The guilt is there, and he would neither deny nor mitigate it. What he does attempt to do is show the effect of the crises of Nazi history on the German masses. These crises —"psychological turning points," he calls them—included the Reichstag fire, the blood purge of 1934 and the deposition of military leaders Fritsch and Blomberg.

In each case the Nazis had a specific objective in mind. In each case they found a scapegoat and an opportunity to come forth, in a burst of moral indignation and "restore order." And each crisis advanced the enslavement of the German people a step further; the Fritsch-Blomberg affair in early 1938, which brought about the destruction of the German army's independence, completed the enslavement.

"The various techniques of the Nazis," Gisevius writes, "were always crude and primitive. Their 'reasonable' adversaries were always so disconcerted largely because they could not conceive of so much baseness, so much unrestraint, and so much barbarism all rolled into one. Again and again they racked their brains trying to imagine what 'really' lay behind Hitler's peculiar behavior. How often the world wondered at the speed with which the Nazi lightning struck—and yet the usurper and his clique were merely taking advantage of the period that his opponents devoted to civilized reflection."

Successively terrorized and duped, blanketed by propaganda devices which either kept them completely ignorant of happenings in the world and Germany or else gave them a carefully distorted interpretation, the German people were led from one crisis to another until they came to the ultimate crisis of war. Even on the brink of war, they did not believe that war was coming: Hitler wanted peace.

In 1938, "even the most fanatical party members frankly expressed their conviction that their millenial Reich would not last 12 months if war were declared. . . . The people, exhausted by the turbulence of revolution, sincerely longed for peace and quiet. Everyone realized that war was a deadly serious matter. War meant bread cards, starvation rations, and intensified terrorism. War meant hundreds of thousands of lives, not to mention air raids. War meant a headlong plunge into the abyss. In 1938 such things were simply inconceivable."

How did they come to accept war, then? Because it looked as though the war was phony—successful bluffing on Hitler's part. When Hitler was handed Czechoslovakia on a silver platter at Munich, who were the German people to object when apparently no one else objected? Somehow, incredibly, Hitler's insane foreign policy was "working out," just as his equally weird domestic policy had been. By the time the phony war had become a real war, it was too late.

From the beginning the opposition had seen the overthrow of the Nazi regime as a *coup d'etat* to be undertaken by the military. The record of the attempts to win over the generals and, having won them over, to urge them to act, is one of the saddest parts of Gisevius' story. The theory of General Franz Halder, chief of the German general staff, that a military defeat was necessary as a setback to inaugurate the coup, is typical of the passivity on the part of the people who could have stopped Hitler. Halder thought the invasion of Norway would provide such a setback, but the invasion, incredibly, was a success, and Halder gradually broke with the opposition.

It has been argued that even if the bomb plot of July 20, 1944, had succeeded, it would not have resulted in the overthrow of Nazism but would simply have meant a continuation of Nazi policy—and war—under the direction of a military clique. As far as the intentions of Colonel Count Klaus von Stauffenberg, the man who detonated the bomb, were concerned, the charge is justified. But Stauffenberg represented only one element in the conspiracy, and not the controlling element. The men who would have run Germany would have been Beck, Oster, Goerdeler, Nebe and Gisevius—men determined to rid Germany of Nazism and bring the war to an end.

The events leading to the debacle of July 20, and the horror of that day itself, are told in a kind of crescendo of disaster. Everything conceivable went wrong, including the fact that Hitler was not killed, but more than things going wrong, it was the profound conviction that things could not go right—that it was too late. The other conspirators mistrusted Stauffenberg—not only his policies, but his curious, almost vague way of setting about his preparations. A few days before July 20, one of the conspirators said to Gisevius: "It all strikes me as so playful; it . . . can't . . . be . . . done . . . this way."

Partly this was the result of the necessarily diverse and disconnected composition of the resistance and the extreme difficulties under which it had to work, for it is one thing to be the member of a resistance movement in an occupied country but it is quite another in one's own country, where the people are encircled not only by the terror of the regime but also by the feeling that if they lost the war they would all, guilty and innocent alike, be condemned.

This feeling was, of course, intensified by the Allied formula of unconditional surrender which, like the bombings of the German cities, unified the people and gave them determination to fight to the bitter end. It is almost incomprehensible that at no time did the Allied powers give the German opposition any encouragement. Despite repeated efforts on the part of the opposition to establish negotiations, the Allies refused to have anything to do with them. With Allied support, the opposition could probably have brought off a successful *putsch*, ended the war much earlier and at the same time presented the Allies with a nucleus of able men to constitute a German government. Instead those men are mostly dead.

Gisevius is not critical of the Allies on this score, but the years since the German capitulation are all too painful evidence of the unwisdom of those policies which guided us. We proceeded on the most naive and untenable of all possible assumptions: That all Germans are bad, and to this we added a willful refusal even to try to understand the historical and sociological and economic origins of the Nazi enslavement of the German people, and if that were not enough we operated on the awful hypocrisy that we, including our totalitarian friends the Russians, were moral paragons. Had we deliberately set out to alienate the Germans from us and from democracy for all time, we could scarcely have succeeded better than in the conduct of our occupation.

It is doubtless too late now, but Gisevius' fine tribute to the martyrs of the German resistance may provide some insight into the magnitude of the opportunity lost.

To the Bitter End, By Hans B. Gisevius, Houghton-

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